"The Restless Traveler"

By Jim Schaap

Somehow, I think I knew what was going on, in part, I think, because I knew the man, his history, and the sometimes stinging effects of childhood experience. He'd immigrated to Canada after the war, after the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, and not all of that experience--hiding from conscription, living in fear day and night, the hunger winter--not all of that simply sifts out of one's life when it's left behind. If there are jackboots on the necks of your neighbors, you don't walk away whistling.

What happened was a kindly old retired professor walked up on the steps of the tour bus and began to tell the peculiarly German story of New Ulm, Minnesota, a town that celebrates its heritage of sauerbraten, schweinhocks, and polka bands. In his defense, the old prof was German-American, not German. In all likelihood, he spent the early 40s here in the States, picking ripened milkweed pods for parachute silk in the U. S. war effort, no more a Nazi than any of the other seniors on the tour bus.

No matter. Once he started talking--even though he spoke English with no accent--he was unapologetically German; after all, his chamber-of-commerce job was to sell the town, which means to sell the local, proud German heritage.

And our tourist, the man who couldn't forget the Nazis snarls in his boyhood backyard, got what the Dutch might call "benawed," so breathtakingly claustrophobic that he literally couldn't stand it. This 80+ year old war survivor had distinguished himself already as someone who could be strong-willed, to say the least. He was, after all, a man who'd climbed the Himalayas--no marshmellow. And he'd lost a leg in an accident--he hobbled demonstrably, but never complained. In

just two days, he'd distinguished himself clearly, so when we noticed that something was decidely wrong with him, initially at least, we rolled our eyes.

But my suspicions weren't far afield. Here's what he wrote in a little summary he penned of his experience on our Minnesota bus tour: "Memories podded up about the Second World War, when German soldiers occupied Holland--us. Then when someone was going to give me a small sticker to put on my chest, it bothered me. I left the room to go outside. There was something that disturbed me, my memory in the past, when the Jews had to wear are armbands with the name "Jew", to separate them from (us) whom they considered other (Germanic) Dutch people."

I think it was a version of post-survival stress. Something in the kindly old professor's mannerisms, his tone, his story, something in that little tourist sticker unearthed memories our own "restless traveler" might well have thought buried, and he nearly fell apart.

"He was very knowledgeable and could not stop telling his stories about German history and Indian wars," he wrote. "He spoke while the bus drove around, to our next stop. I fretted, but I could not get out of the bus; He was driving me up the wall. I was stuck in the back of the bus and could not escape him."

Achingly, painfully tethered. By choice, right then, he would have deserted the whole bus if he could avoid pain that was closing in on him--ancient, deadly fears long ago thought put to rest, but suddenly awakened by tone and rhetoric and ethnic pride.

When we got out of the bus at the new college chapel, I could see he was not to be reasoned with. Some spirit in him was out of control--and he knew it too. "When we arrived at this

most beautiful Lutheran chapel," he wrote, "I made sure to stay in the back on a church bench, so I could escape the professor's diatribe attack on my senses. I fretted about myself--within my own, why I do not have more patience."

And then, "Finally he stopped talking," the Dutchman wrote.

The retired prof had stopped because we'd entered the Martin Luther College chapel, where, serendipitously, which is to say, providentially, the college's own fine organist just happened to show up. That man opened up that new huge organ in a fashion that no guitar and drum set can ever do. Together, we sang old hymns, even "A Mighty Fortress," Luther's own. It was a blessing I cannot describe. But our war survivor tries--listen:

"Then the college organist played this beautiful very large pipe organ, with songs so wonderful. Peace came in my heart, and I thanked God for his patience with me, being a 'Restless Traveler.' Those familiar songs, released my anxiety," he wrote.

Those old hymns faith were decidedly providential therapy.

What he required at that point--and he understood it himself--was therapy. That retired history prof never wore the black SS coat and had nothing to do with The Final Solution.

He was an American, doing what lots of us do--taking pride in his heritage, including the town's own history, which started a full century before a little madman with a paintbrush mustache.

But there's a little more to the story of our restless traveler. Henceforth we were transported to the Shell Brewery, where, following a short tour, we were led thirstily to their tasting room for some product research.

"We were invited to taste small amounts of different types of beer," our restless traveler wrote, quelling, for a moment at least, his old fears and hatred. "It tasted good and put me in a mood

to sing a song, song from my younger days--not quite proper for elderly Christian persons perhaps, but seemed funny." There's nothing like a little sip to help you forget, maybe, eh?

But the charmer was the evening, when, accompanying some fine German drinking songs, a motley crew of masked intruders, the Naaren, ended our German dinner by pulling every last one of the weary travelers from their chairs and waltzing them into a series of hoopla dances and marches that would have sent all of our travelers reeling had they carted in a keg or two with them. Which they hadn't, thank goodness.

Here's the way the Dutchman descriped the hijinks: "A dozen characters, men and women, although whether man and woman was difficult to distinguish, were wearing wooden masks and colorful costumes. They entered the hall dancing, and hobbled between our dinner tables, encouraging us to join. It took me a while before I was ready to accept their invitation, until I secured a woman who was a good dancer. I managed to get a hold of her. Her mask was not as scary as than other ones. When the music stopped, she gave me complement about my dancing. It made my day."

It made his day.

And thus, presumably, our restless traveler, so struck earlier in the day, was comforted finally, by the great hymns of the church, a few sips of good stout German beer, and a sporty jaunt with a masked intruder--a woman he managed to get hold of, he says, who then told him that for an old guy with a wooden leg, he was, by cracky, one heckuva good dancer.

And that's the whole story. Let preachers of all types and persuasions do with it what they will. All I know is, that's the way I saw it, and the way he tells it. There's got to be a sermon there, if we have ears.